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The Church of the Holy Cross and the Iconography of Kingship*

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Abstract

This paper examines the exterior and interior decorative programs of the Church of the Holy Cross at Ałt'amar, the tenth-century palace church of Gagik Artsruni, King of Vaspurakan. Although the church has been the subject of numerous studies, little attention has been given to the church's palatine function. In marked contrast, other medieval palace churches have been studied almost entirely in terms of their palatine function. When the decorative programs of the Church of the Holy Cross are analyzed in this palatine context, it can be demonstrated that they were designed to convey a unified royal message through repeated associations of particular elements—the King, Adam, and the Naming of the Animals. These associations characterize the nature of Gagik Artsruni's kingship by presenting the rule of Adam in Paradise as a paradigm to which Gagik's rule could be likened. This visual expression of the nature of Gagik's kingship has parallels in Byzantine traditions of imperial representation and with the princely imagery of Islamic court art. The motivation behind this presentation of the king can be connected to the circumstances surrounding Gagik Artsruni's rise to power, and to his claim to kingship based on political legitimacy and Christian piety.

During the first quarter of the tenth century King Gagik Artsruni established a new capital for his southern Armenian Kingdom of Vaspurakan. The city was constructed on an island in Lake Van, in present day eastern Turkey. We are fortunate in having a contemporary description of the city, celebrated by the anonymous author as the "splendid, celebrated, and remarkable Ałt'amar."¹ He describes princely residences for members of the court, terraced gardens, storehouses, armories and treasuries, all of which were grouped around a central palace.² The church, which was dedicated to the Holy Cross, was constructed to the north of the palace.

The Church of the Holy Cross is all that survives of the tenth-century city of Ałt'amar (Fig. 2).³ It is best known for its extensive sculptural program—over two hundred remarkably well-preserved figures carved in low relief decorate the exterior. The interior is less well preserved, but retains two fresco cycles; one circling the drum of the dome and one circling the lower walls of the church.

Scholarly attention has focused primarily on the sculpture, and, to a lesser degree, on the fresco program.⁴ These

studies have not treated the interior and exterior programs as parts of a unified whole, nor have they examined the decorative programs in their palatine context.⁵ As one of only a few surviving medieval palace churches east of Constantinople, the Church of the Holy Cross is a rich source of information for the study of royal iconography.⁶ When the exterior and interior decorative programs are analyzed in the context of the church's palatine function, it can be demonstrated that they were designed to convey a unified royal message through the repeated associations of the same elements. This message is directly connected to the circumstances surrounding Gagik Artsruni's rise to power, and to his claim to kingship based on political legitimacy and Christian piety.

To understand the iconography, an understanding of the political situation in late ninth and early tenth-century Armenia is necessary. At this period medieval Armenia was a vassal state of Islam, administered by an *ostikan*, or resident governor, who was appointed by the court at Baghdad. While many battles were waged between the Armenians and their Arab overlords, the most damaging conflicts occurred between the Armenian *naxarars*, or members of the princely houses of Armenia. The Artsruni clan controlled the southern principality of Vaspurakan (Fig. 1). Centered around Lake Van, it extended to the province of Ararat in the north and to Lake Urmia in the east. The Bagratuni controlled the more extensive northern provinces of Armenia, with the city of Dvin as their capital. Through their loyalty to the *ostikans* the Bagratids became the most powerful family in Armenia. A history of Armenia in the late ninth and tenth centuries is largely the account of the struggle between these two dominant families for control of the country.

Remarkably, two contemporary histories survive which recount these events. In the *History of the House of the Artsrunik'*, Thomas Artsruni describes events occurring through the year 904, when an anonymous writer continues the narrative through the reign of Gagik Artsruni.⁷ This work is a panegyric of the Artsrunik' family, commissioned by Gagik "so that the valor and virtue [of the Artsrunik'] may be clearly revealed by name, place and time."⁸ John Draxanakertc'i, the Armenian Patriarch from 897/98 to 925, wrote the *History of Armenia* in 923–24, when the Armenian katholikosate moved to Ałt'amar.⁹ Essentially a political

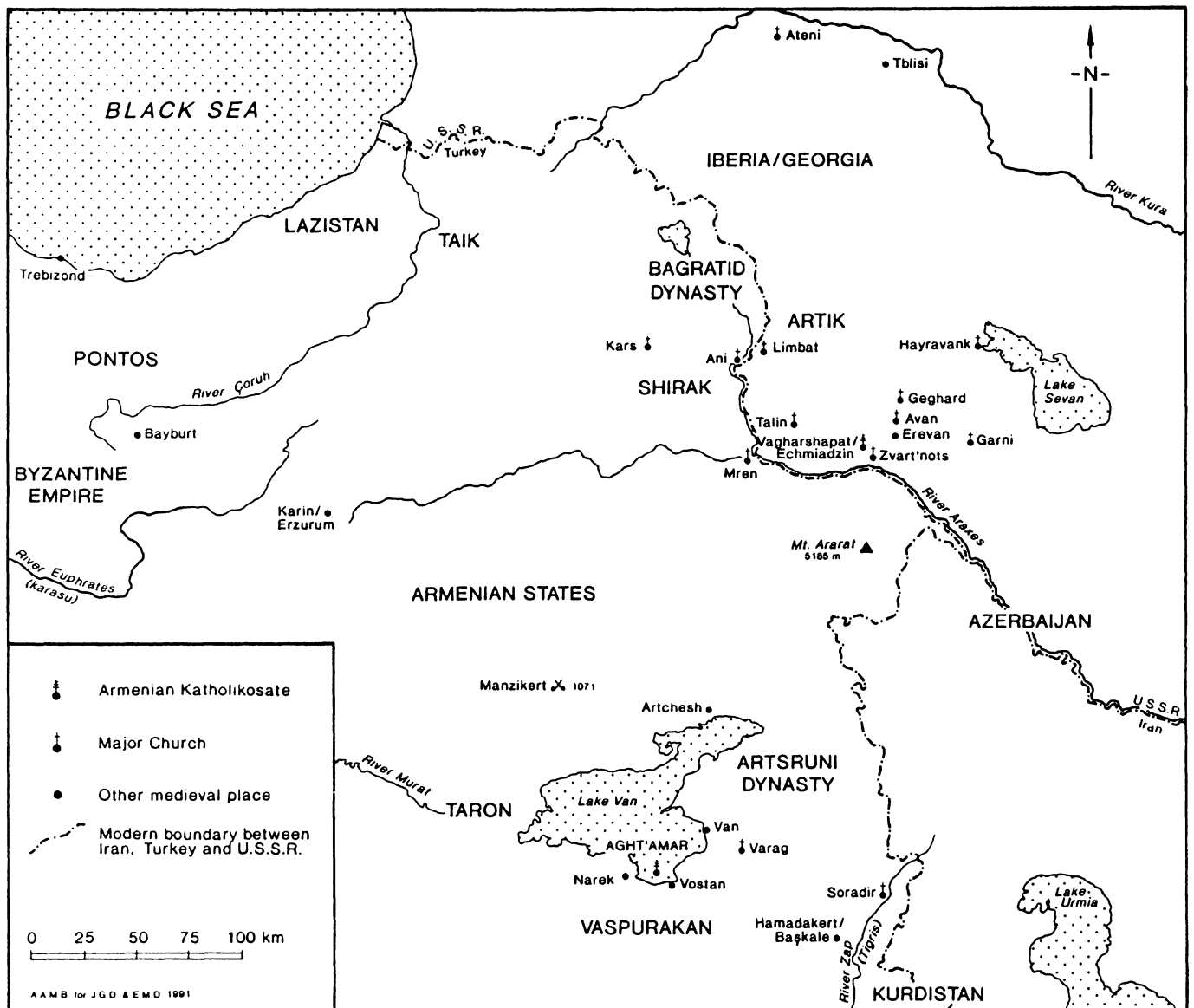


FIGURE 1. Map of the Kingdoms of Armenia. From J. G. Davies, *Medieval Armenian Art and Architecture. The Church of the Holy Cross, Aghtamar* (London, 1991), plate facing page 1.

history, this account was written to demonstrate the fatal consequences of civil war for the *naxarars*.¹⁰

The Baghdad Caliphate negotiated peace treaties with the Artsrunik' and the Bagratids, who each agreed to pay annual tribute money and to provide military assistance. The Arabs realized that enmity between the two clans could be advantageous; if their hostilities could be maintained there was little chance of their uniting in rebellion. To this end, the court at Baghdad doled out titles and recognitions to both families. Byzantium, too, had a vested interest in Armenia, as the country was effectively a buffer zone between the eastern frontier of the Empire and the western border of

the Caliphate. The court at Constantinople granted titles and honors to counter Arab influence, recognizing first one family and then the other. These convoluted political alliances were further complicated by internal division within the Bagratid house and by the insurrection in 914 of the *ostikan* Yusuf against the Baghdad Caliphate.¹¹

Gagik Artsruni assumed power on the death of his elder brother Asot in 904, but his title remained that of Prince of Vaspurakan until 908, when Yusuf crowned him King of Armenia.¹² Shortly after this recognition Gagik was sent a crown and embroidered robes by al-Moqtadir, the Caliph of Baghdad, conferring upon him a second time the



FIGURE 2. General view of the island of Attamar and the church of the Holy Cross (photo: author).

title King of Armenia.¹³ The anonymous continuer recognizes that the greater honor was conferred by the Caliph and stresses Gagik's worthiness: "no one has ever heard tell of it or seen it, to be able to reveal that anyone was honored by the [caliph's] court with the dignity of wearing a crown, especially a Christian and orthodox believer and son of a King, the hereditary and legitimate ruler of Armenia."¹⁴

In 914 the Byzantine court granted Asot II Bagratuni the title ἄρχων τῶν ἀρχόντων, or Prince of Princes, in official recognition of his status as the legitimate heir to the Bagratid throne, and later that same year Asot visited Constantinople at the invitation of the Emperor Constantine

VII.¹⁵ The Byzantines recognized Asot in direct opposition to an anti-King put forward by the *ostikan* Yusuf, who was now in open rebellion against the court of Baghdad. Responding to Yusuf's show of force, the Caliph al-Moqtadir sent Gagik a third crown and enlisted his aid in the overthrow and imprisonment of Yusuf.¹⁶ A new *ostikan* was appointed, who retaliated against Gagik by granting Asot the title *Šahanšah*, or King of Kings, thus recognizing his rule above that of the two other Armenian kings.¹⁷

This tense political climate and its resultant consequences are described by the Patriarch Drasxanakert'ci, known in the Byzantine Empire as John Katholikos. In the

introduction to his *History of Armenia* he writes: “You will see how there were three kings that ruled at the same time who were all in conflict with one another. I shall tell you how, because of the hostility among the three holders of the title King, wicked deeds, turmoils, trembling and destructive confusions as well as unworthy works, unexpected devastation and fear of death were provoked.”¹⁸

In 904, when Prince Gagik Artsruni was raised to the position of regent, his first task was to consolidate power in a principality left vulnerable by the untimely death of his elder brother Asot. Seeking a suitable location from which to conduct his campaigns, Gagik enlarged the site of his father’s palace on the slope of the rock of Van. He also supervised renovation and new construction in the city of Ostan, located on the south shore of Lake Van. Gagik fortified the town, enclosing it with walls which extended to the lake. He constructed a new palace and rebuilt the ruined church, to which he transferred a relic of the True Cross on the occasion of the church’s rededication.¹⁹

The island of Alt’amar, two miles from the south shore of Lake Van near the city of Ostan, offered the King a superior setting, and “seeing the pleasantness of the spot and recognizing that it was a refuge from enemy raids, he undertook to build on it in a fearsome and amazing fashion” (Fig. 3).²⁰ According to the historian the city was begun sometime after 908, when Gagik was raised to the rank of King, and was constructed in five years.²¹ Alt’amar would function as the capital of Vaspurakan until 1021, when it was ceded by King Senek’erim Artsruni to the Byzantine Emperor Basil II in exchange for lands in the region of Sebaste.²²

The city of Alt’amar was enclosed by fortified walls “amazingly constructed, fearsome and adorned with very high and broad-based towers and raised bastions, which had in them deep niches with pleasure seats, where the King often took his ease with his sons and noble courtiers.”²³ Gagik oversaw the planning of “streets and terraced gardens and residences for the princes, according to their rank, and gardens and parks, distinguishing the areas for parks and flower gardens . . . and planted many trees, which were watered from a sweet and never-failing spring.”²⁴ There were “enormous storehouses and magazines, and also depositories for treasures and measureless numbers of arms and armor.”²⁵

For himself the King built a palace which appeared “as a great hill in the middle of the city.”²⁶ It was square in plan, with great domes and vaulted spaces and “took the form of a bird in flight, without the support of any pillar.”²⁷ The decorative program of the palace depicted the enthroned King with his court, enjoying entertainment provided by musicians and “maidens dancing in an admirable manner.”²⁸ This program also included depictions of armed combats, wrestling matches and “troops of lions and other wild beasts, and flocks of birds adorned with various plumage.”²⁹ The historian rather thriftily sums up these myriad

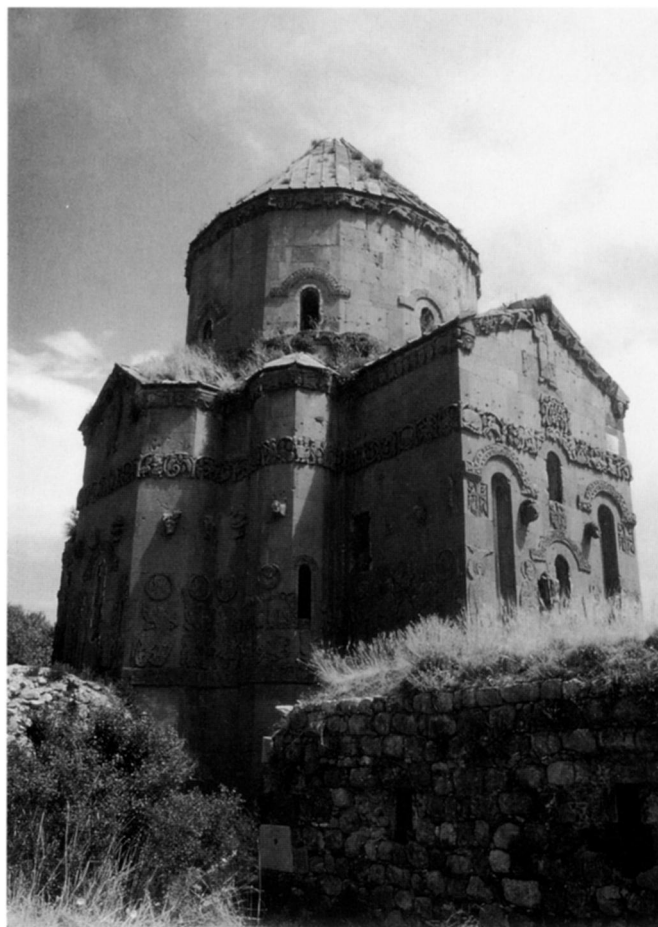


FIGURE 3. Church of the Holy Cross from the southeast (photo: author).

splendors: “if anyone wished to enumerate all the works of art in the palace, it would be a great labor for himself and his audience.”³⁰

While the construction of the city was in progress, Gagik destroyed an Arab fortress on the north shore of Lake Van and “raising their stones he carried [them] across the waves of the sea to use them as material for the construction of the holy church, raising the temple of glory in place of impure houses of idolatry.”³¹ The anonymous continuer of the *History of the Artsrunik’* spends much effort describing this “temple of glory”—the Church of the Holy Cross.

The architect by trade was Manuel, whom we mentioned above, a man full of wisdom and efficacious in his business, he built the church with admirable skill. He gave the decoration into the hands of the monk we mentioned above to fashion in stone exact representations from life, beginning with Abraham and David as far as our Lord Jesus Christ. He arranged the orders of prophets and apostles each according to their station, an admirable sight. He created and brought together on the church herds of animals

and flocks of birds and groups of wild beasts, boars, lions, bulls and bears facing one another and calling to mind their struggle for existence which is very pleasing to wise men.

He encircled the church with a glorious frieze in detailed sections, fashioning vines and peaceful vintagers, wild beasts and serpents whose appearances reproduce their kind with differences of form each according to their species.

On all four sides above the summit of the exedrae in true likeness are the images of the four evangelists, who are rightfully the crown of joy of the holy church and superior to all the saints. . . . Then on the south side of the apse above the door of the church he fashioned a royal gallery with a vaulted staircase as a means of descent from top to bottom, to act as a place where the king may pray isolated and free from men, where he may come to converse with God undisturbed in his thoughts.

And inside he created the wonderful holy of holies with colored paintings and silvered doors, and filled it with gold ornaments and images sheathed with gold, precious stones and pearl ornaments, and with various brilliant and splendid decorations, which wonderfully show to us the second Jerusalem, and the gate to the celestial Sion.³²

The exterior of the church is in a remarkable state of preservation, with most of the damage restricted to the frieze of projecting animal heads. The east and west facades are the main focus of this analysis as they present the primary royal message of the decorative program in a precise and elegant format, developing similar presentations of the King.

Two sculptural registers begin and end on the east facade (Fig. 4). The upper register takes the form of an inhabited vine scroll that wraps around the building, extending from either side of a central medallion, which is formed by an encircling vine. Depicted in this medallion is a bearded man, haloed and crowned, who sits cross-legged on a cushion (Fig. 5). With his left hand he reaches up to a cluster of grapes and he holds a cup of wine in his right hand. He is flanked by two attendants and an enthusiastic lion, which bounds towards the attendant on the left.

Allowing for differences in scale, this depiction has similarities with the life-sized portrait of Gagik Artsruni on the west facade, specifically in the shape of the crown and the presence of both a beard and halo (Fig. 6). Whether the image of the king on the east facade was intended as a literal portrait of King Gagik or not, it was a currently recognizable statement of legitimate royal power and authority. The image of a seated king appropriates the iconography of a silver medallion issued by al-Moqtadir, the Islamic Caliph who ruled from 908–932 and whose Caliphate included the Kingdom of Vaspurakan (Fig. 7).³³

Centered below the image of the seated king is a second register with a central medallion which contains a bust por-



FIGURE 4. *Church of the Holy Cross, east facade (photo: author).*

trait of Adam (Fig. 8). An inscription to the left reads “and Adam gave names to all the animals and wild beasts.”³⁴ Flanking the portrait of Adam are the heads of a lion and a bull, and animal-heads, animal-head protomes and animals carved in low relief extend around the building from either side of this medallion.

The medallion containing the depiction of the seated king is centered directly above the medallion containing the portrait of Adam. This careful positioning moved both images slightly to the right of the true center of the facade, a precise placement which suggests that the depiction of Adam was intended to be viewed in conjunction with that of the King directly above it.³⁵ The inscription reminds the reader that Adam named the animals, an event that took place before the Fall, when Adam ruled in Paradise, and as a paradigm of kingship the motif of Adam as King of paradise is certainly an appropriate decoration for a palatine church. Yet the careful placement of the images suggests a more specific motive, which was to liken the rule of Gagik to that of Adam in Paradise. In this context the representation of the seated ruler combines with the portrait of Adam below it to characterize the nature of Gagik’s kingship, stressing his wisdom and authority and implying divine approval of his rule.

The west facade of the Church of the Holy Cross is famous for the heroically scaled portrait of Gagik Artsruni, who is depicted presenting a model of his church to Christ (Figs. 10, 11). This sculptural group is described in the *History of the House of the Artsrunik*:

He represented on the vault of the west apse the sign of the cross and the image of the Saviour, who for our sake was clothed in flesh and became visible as man. He arranged opposite the Saviour the true likeness and glorious image of King Gagik, who by means of magnificent faith raises the church, holding it up with his arms as a



FIGURE 5. *Church of the Holy Cross, east facade, detail; seated king flanked by attendants (photo: author).*



FIGURE 6. (left) *Church of the Holy Cross, west facade, detail; portrait of King Gagik Artsruni (photo: author).*



FIGURE 7. (above) *Silver medallion issued by the Caliph al-Moqtadir. Photo from B. Spuler and J. Sourdel-Thomine, eds., Die Kunst des Islam, Propyläen Kunstgeschichte IV (Berlin, 1973), plate 155a.*



FIGURE 8. *Church of the Holy Cross, east facade, detail; medallion portrait of Adam and inscription, flanked by animals (photo: author).*

gold amphora full of manna, or as a gold pyxis filled with sweet perfume; he stands before the Lord, depicted as if imploring the remission of his sins. Although there may be words [of blame] in our history, nevertheless the king will not want in claiming the gifts [he seeks], hoping for future restitution.³⁶

This portrait is a seemingly straightforward presentation of Gagik in the role of royal donor, yet the carved vine scroll which runs above the depictions of Christ and the King suggests a second interpretation (Fig. 9). The left section of the scroll depicts, from left to right, a doe and a fawn, a bear nursing one cub while another rides on her back, and a man wresting a large pumpkin from the vine. These are gentle, bucolic scenes. The right section shows the contrasting, violent side of nature: from left to right, a man being held in an unwelcome embrace by a bear, a man entwined in a tree, two confronted rams, and a man shooting arrows at a bear. The scenes of the vine scroll are thematically divided only on this one facade, indicating that the iconography was the result of careful choice.³⁷

Such juxtapositions of the peaceful and savage sides of nature are known from both Byzantine and Islamic palatine art, where they serve to celebrate the benefits of good and pious rulership. In his discussion of the peristyle mosaic of the Great Palace in Constantinople, J. Trilling identifies three main themes; rural or idyllic life, animal violence, and protection. He suggests that these themes, when taken together, celebrate the imposition of peace and the reintegration of weakened societies under the resolute guidance of

imperial rule.³⁸ The most notable Islamic example is the eighth-century mosaic in the throne room at Khirbat al-Mafjar. The mosaic depicts a central fruit tree with two gazelles peacefully grazing to the left and a lion attacking a gazelle to the right. R. Ettinghausen has interpreted this iconography as the Realm of Islam versus the Realm of War, with the peaceful gazelles also representing the reign of peace in the caliph's realm.³⁹

There are additional examples of Byzantine palace art and imperial encomia which use animal imagery to characterize and celebrate imperial power.⁴⁰ One common *topos* of Byzantine imperial rhetoric was to liken the enemies of the emperor to wild beasts.⁴¹ These beasts with their savage natures would either be killed by the emperor, or, like Orpheus, he would tame them.⁴² A second convention of imperial encomia is expressed in a fourth-century exegesis of the Creation story, where Adam's dominion over the animals is interpreted as the archetype of monarchy.⁴³ P. Magdalino has identified a similar concept in an *ekphrasis*, or literary description, written in the late ninth or early tenth century by Leo Choïrosphaktes, which describes the decorative program of a palace bath in Constantinople. Among the figural decorations described by the poet are representations of the emperor holding a sword, the empress strewing flower petals, river gods, aquatic scenes, fish, birds, a serpent, and a lion. Magdalino has argued that these elements combine to create an image of Paradise, a *typos* of divinely instituted monarchy.⁴⁴

Thus it may be suggested that the iconography of the vine scroll on the west facade of Alt'amar combines with the portrait of the King below it to represent Gagik symbolically as the ruler of a peaceful land and as a powerful defender of that land against its enemies. Divine approval of his stewardship is given visible expression in the figure of Christ, who raises his right hand in blessing. When viewed in this context, the presentation of Gagik on the west facade is analogous to that seen on the east facade, where his rule is likened to that of Adam in Paradise. As demonstrated above, this symbolic representation has parallels with Byzantine traditions of imperial representation.

In sad contrast to the relative preservation of the exterior, the painted decoration of the interior is in a deplorable state. The original frescoes in the dome were destroyed in the third quarter of the thirteenth century when the dome collapsed, and other of the original scenes have been painted over since the tenth century.⁴⁵ Even with these losses, the frescoes are unique among tenth-century Armenian churches. There are two remaining fresco cycles, one circling the lower walls and one in the drum of the dome.

The scenes chosen for the fresco cycle of the lower walls follow the standard Byzantine program of the time; in the context of this discussion it is the orientation of the cycle which is of interest.⁴⁶ The cycle begins in the south apse,

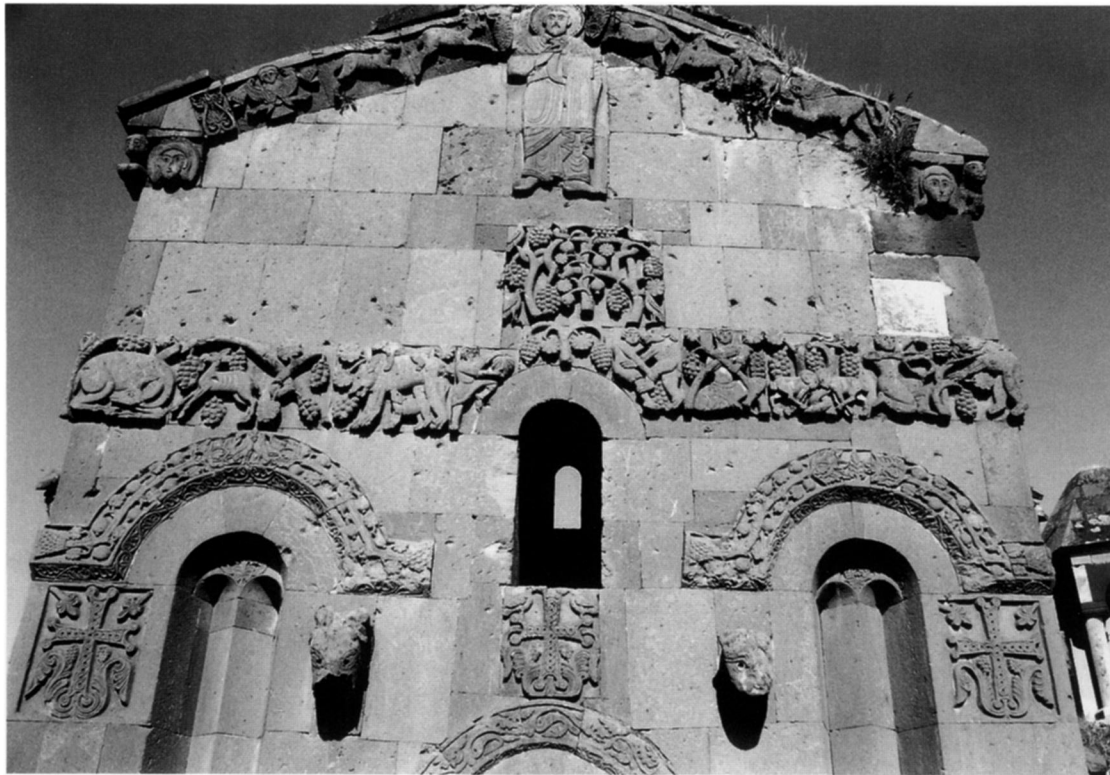


FIGURE 9. *Church of the Holy Cross, west facade, detail; vine scroll (photo: author).*



FIGURE 10. *Church of the Holy Cross, west facade, detail; King Gagik Artsruni presenting a model of his church to Christ (photo: author).*

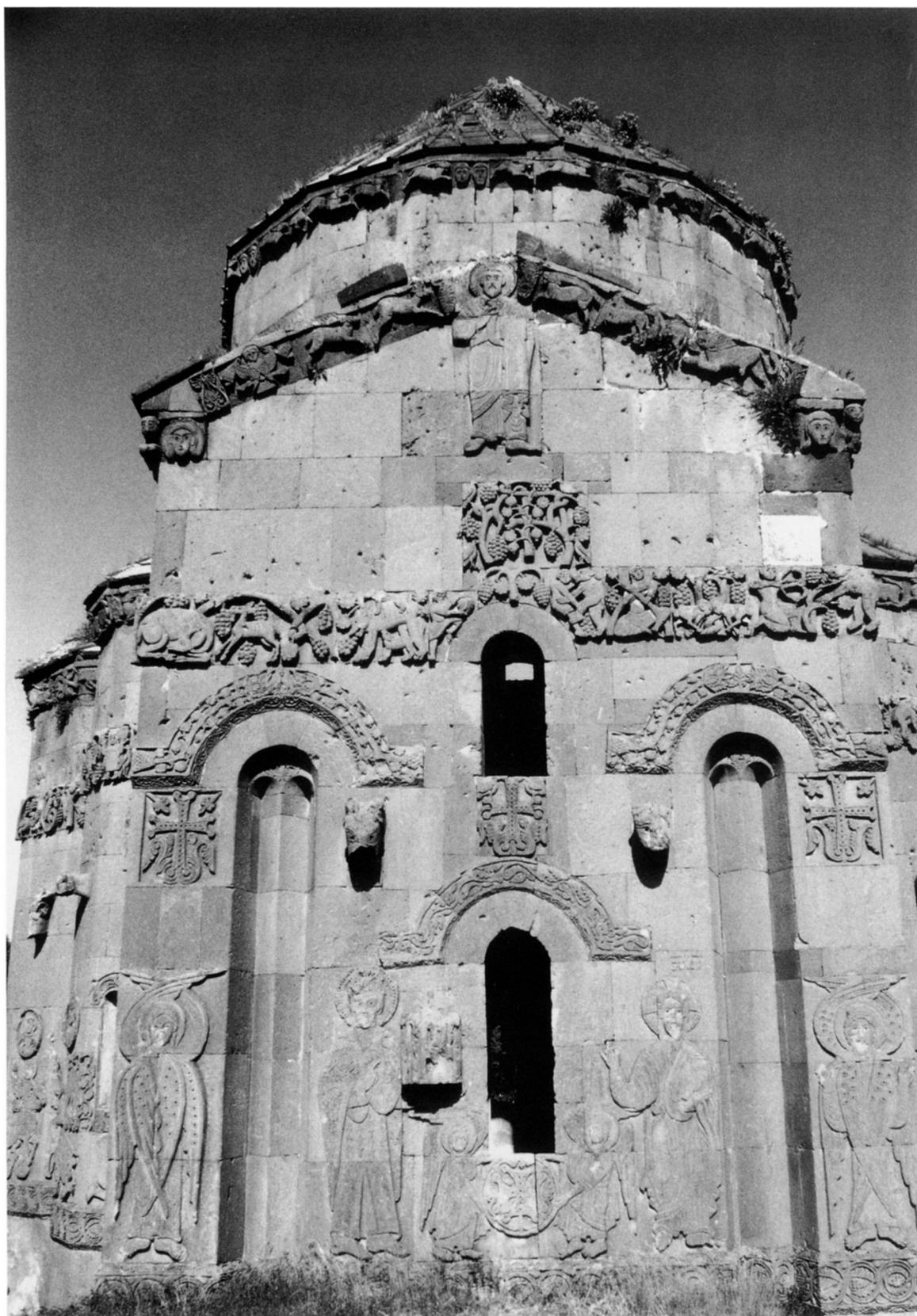


FIGURE 11. *Church of the Holy Cross, west facade (photo: author).*

above the royal gallery, and the scenes of the first two registers proceed chronologically from left to right, wrapping around the interior. The second register skips over the gallery, which was not decorated with figural scenes. The third and lowest register also reads from left to right, beginning to the right of the south door, but it returns to end with the depiction of the Second Coming, which is placed directly under the King's gallery in the lunette above the door.

This unusual orientation can only be explained by the presence of the royal gallery. The decorative program was arranged so that the King was effectively bracketed by the lower fresco cycle, which began above his head and ended below his feet. This orientation was emphasized by the location of the main door of the church, which was below the royal gallery and beneath the depiction of the Second Coming.⁴⁷

The fresco cycle in the drum of the dome is very poorly preserved. Several scenes have been totally lost and little paint remains on those which survive. The cycle, which begins above the east apse, reads in a clockwise direction and depicts scenes from the book of Genesis beginning with the Creation of Adam and ending with the Expulsion. In the context of this discussion the first section of the cycle, which stretches from the east to the south apse, is of particular importance.⁴⁸ This section was originally composed of five scenes, of which only the first four survive. They depict the Creation of Adam, Adam in Paradise, the Creation of Eve, and God Giving Adam Power Over the Animals.

The orientation of the drum cycle, like the orientation of the lower fresco cycle, is keyed to the royal gallery in the south apse. Beginning the drum cycle in the east allowed two significant scenes to be positioned directly above the King's gallery. The deliberate association of these two scenes with the royal gallery is confirmed by the altered chronological sequence of this section of the cycle. The depiction of the Creation of Eve was displaced from its proper chronological position, which would have put it above the gallery, and placed instead in the position immediately preceding the gallery.

Only one of the two scenes which were originally located above the royal gallery survives, that depicting God Giving Adam Power over the Animals (Fig. 12). The figure of God fills the space between the drum niche to the left and the window to the right.⁴⁹ Within the niche are images of paired birds and fish, and above it are depictions of small hoofed animals. God gestures to the left, toward the animals. This emphasis on movement, originating on the left side, clearly indicates that this section of the cycle did not stand alone and that it was originally part of a larger scene which continued in the adjacent space to the right.

A clue to the iconography of the lost section is provided by the sequence of scenes in the Cotton Genesis, as seen in the Creation cupola in the atrium of San Marco.

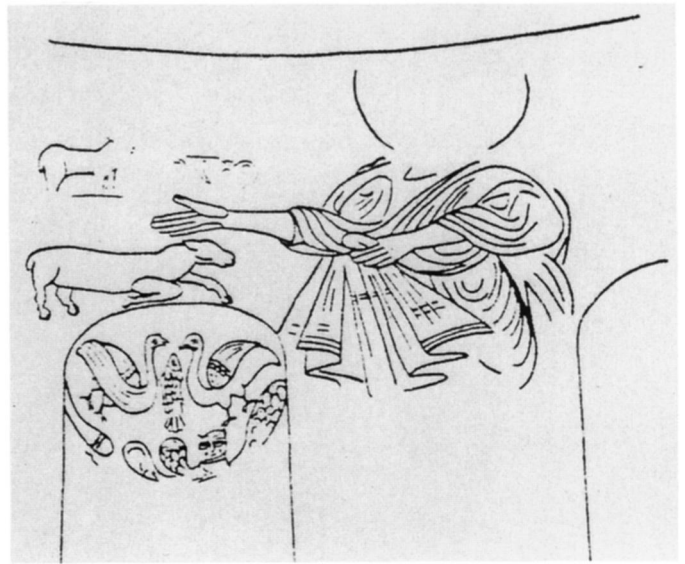


FIGURE 12. *Church of the Holy Cross, drum fresco cycle, detail. Drawing of God granting Adam dominion over the Animals, after N. Thierry, "Le Cycle de la création et de la faute d'Adam à Aght'amar," Revue des études arméniennes, XVII (1983), Fig. 4.*

The sequence in Venice depicts the Animation of Adam, Adam in Paradise, the Naming of the Animals and the Creation of Eve.⁵⁰ If this series is used as a reference to reconstruct the drum cycle at Aght'amar, the fifth scene would depict Adam Naming the Animals.

Thus depictions of God Giving Adam Power Over the Animals and Adam Naming the Animals appear to have been deliberately placed above the royal gallery at Aght'amar. The first of these scenes emphasizes the divine establishment of Adam's power, while the second emphasizes Adam's wise execution of this power and the resultant peace and concord in his kingdom. By their proximity to the King's gallery these two scenes would have suggested to the viewer a parallel between the King of Paradise and the King of Vaspurakan.

This parallel was emphasized by the sculpture of the gallery balustrade. The balustrade itself no longer survives, but photographs taken before its destruction document its appearance.⁵¹ It was decorated with vines laden with pomegranates and with animal heads similar to those carved on the exterior of the church. These animal heads can be identified as an ox, a stag, a tiger or perhaps a lion, a ram, an elephant, and a calf. They represent a good cross-section of the animal population, and therefore cannot simply be interpreted as an allusion to the King's royal power, as would be expressed by lions' heads alone.

Thus the members of Gagik's court assembled in the naos of his palatine church would look up to see their King enthroned in the royal gallery, framed by the fresco cycle, behind a balustrade of carved animal heads and beneath

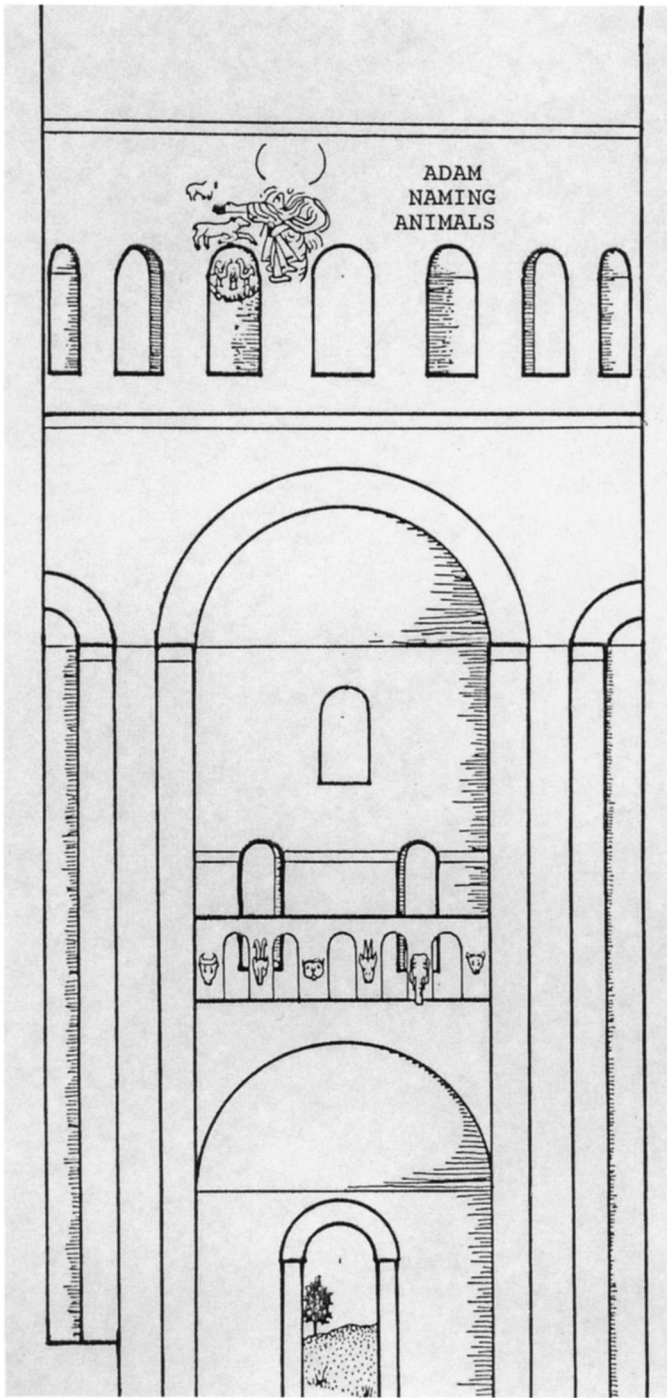


FIGURE 13. *Church of the Holy Cross, reconstruction; view of the Royal Gallery and drum cycle (drawing: R. Freyman).*

depictions of God Giving Adam Power Over the Animals and Adam Naming the Animals (Fig. 13).

It may be proposed that the suggested parallels between Gagik and Adam which are presented in both the interior and the exterior of the church convey the primary

royal message of the decorative program by asserting the King's fitness to rule. The main figural register of the north and south facades, which cannot be fully discussed here, supports this message. For example, the piety of the King's ancestors is repeatedly emphasized. To the right of the entrance to the royal gallery on the south facade are depictions of Saints Sahak and Hamazasp, brothers and Princes of the Artsruni family who were martyred by the Arabs in 786 for refusing to renounce their faith (Fig. 14).⁵² Prominent inscriptions precisely identify each figure: "Lord Saint Sahak, brother of Hamazasp, martyrs and witnesses of Christ," and "Lord Saint Hamazasp, Prince of Vaspurakan." The placement of these figures with their identifying inscriptions near the entrance to the royal gallery was surely motivated by a desire to call attention to the piety of the King's ancestors.

Piety, or the appearance of piety, was a momentous concern for Gagik Artsruni in the second decade of the tenth century, for in his rise to power he had placed himself in a precarious relationship with the tenets of his faith. The new-found strength of the Kingdom of Vaspurakan had been established by turning against the Christian Bagratids. For the decisive conflict Gagik joined his forces with those of the *ostikan* Yusuf in a terrible battle, during which most of the Bagratid nobility were slaughtered and the Bagratid King Smbat was taken prisoner and later killed.⁵³ This battle occurred in 912, some three years before construction began on the Church of the Holy Cross. The Patriarch Drasxanakertc'i writes that it was at this point that Gagik's Christian conscience experienced a re-awakening:

In view of these events, King Gagik and his brother Gurgēn at once realized that this wicked storm as well as the horrible crimes were brought upon the Church of Christ and the faithful people of God because of their guidance . . . [and] feeling remorse in their hearts, did penance in accordance with the canons and decided to dissociate themselves [from Yusuf] and to return to their domain.⁵⁴

Gagik was well acquainted with the consequences of betraying the Christian faith. In 902 the Patriarch had been dispatched by this same Bagratid King Smbat to resolve a conflict between Asot Artsruni, elder brother of Gagik, and Hasan Artsruni, a distant relative. The Patriarch extracted a solemn oath from Asot to release Hasan unharmed, but Asot disregarded his vow and had Hasan blinded.⁵⁵ The Patriarch spells out in no uncertain terms the terrible consequences of such an act:

. . . all those who break their oath, or heed not the words of an intervening prelate, or are easily swayed by the opposite view, bring about their own destruction, and cannot acquire for themselves a secure life. But I employed the power invested in me by the gospels, and having ex-



FIGURE 14. Church of the Holy Cross, south facade, detail; Saints Sahak and Hamazasp (photo: author).

communicated the prince, returned in deep sorrow. After one year, recklessness and ignorance robbed Asot's becoming, stately, and handsome stature like a garment. Thus, still in the prime of his youth, he met his end, and afflicted us with deep grief.⁵⁶

When the excommunicated Prince Asot died at the age of twenty-nine, Gagik, the second son, succeeded his brother as Prince of Vaspurakan. Through his skills in battle and in political maneuvering Gagik attained the rank of King of Vaspurakan. Once this rank was achieved Gagik sought to cloud the circumstances of his rise to power. This is evident from a comparison of the writings of Thomas Artsruni and John Drasxanakertc'i. For example, Thomas does not mention Asot's excommunication. In recounting the Prince's death Thomas stresses that Asot begged forgiveness for "wicked deeds," and offers his opinion that Asot would escape perdition because he had truly repented.⁵⁷ The excommunication is also omitted by the anonymous continuer, but

his knowledge of the event is evident from his attempt to disassociate Gagik from any blame in the matter. In recounting the conflict between Asot and Hasan, he emphasizes that "Gagik, the prince's brother, had intervened and made many efforts to save Hasan from the punishment of blinding."⁵⁸

Like the *History of the House of the Artsrunik*, aspects of the decorative program of the Church of the Holy Cross are propagandistic in intent. In the *History of the Artsrunik* the nature of Gagik's kingship, that of "a Christian and orthodox believer and son of a King, the hereditary and legitimate ruler of Armenia" is repeatedly stressed.⁵⁹ A similar definition of Gagik's kingship is given visual expression in both the interior and exterior of his palatine church, drawing upon Byzantine *topoi* of imperial rhetoric and art, and incorporating Byzantine and Islamic iconography. Through the repeated association of the same elements—the King, Adam, and the Naming of the Animals—the rule of Adam in Paradise is presented as a paradigm to which Gagik's rule could be likened.

NOTES

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1. Thomas Artsruni, *Patmut'iwn Tann Artsruneats'* [History of the House of the Artsrunik'] (Delmar, NY, 1991), 297, facsimile of Thomas Artsruni, *Patmut'iwn Tann Artsruneats'*, K. Patkanov, ed. (St. Petersburg, 1887).
2. Thomas Artsruni, *History of the House of the Artsrunik'*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Detroit, 1985), 355–58.
3. Two subsidiary chapels were added to the northeast of the church sometime after the early fourteenth century, and the southern bell tower and the western chapel were added in the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. For a discussion of these later constructions see Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *Aġt'amar, Church of the Holy Cross* (Cambridge, 1965), 9–10.
4. A general bibliography may be found in Agopik and Armen Manoukin, eds., *Documents of Armenian Architecture* (Milan, 1974), Vol. VIII, *Aġtamar*, Der Nersessian and H. Vahramian, eds., 28–29; works published after 1974 include Nicole Thierry, "Les Peintures de l'église de la Sainte-Croix d'Aġtamar (915–921)," *Second International Symposium on Armenian Art* (Yerevan, 1981), 182–90; Thomas Mathews, "The Genesis Frescoes at Aġt'amar," *Revue des études arméniennes*, XVI (1982), 245–57; N. Thierry, "Le Cycle de la création et de la faute d'Adam à Aġt'amar," *Revue des études arméniennes*, XVII (1983), 289–329; Stephan Mnats'akanian, *Aġtamar* (Saddlebrook, NJ, 1986); J. G. Davies, *Medieval Armenian Art and Architecture. The Church of the Holy Cross, Aġtamar* (London, 1991).
5. The exception is a paper by Catherine Jolivet-Levy, who briefly discusses the church's sculptural program in relation to its palatine function. See Jolivet-Levy, "L'idéologie princière dans les sculptures d'Aġtamar," *Second International Symposium on Armenian Art* (Yerevan, 1981), 86–94.
6. A palace church in Ani, built in the early seventh century but largely reconstructed in the late ninth to early tenth century, was once rich in sculptural decoration but is now in ruins. A second palace at Ani, the so-called "palace of the Baron," was probably home to the wealthy thirteenth-century merchant Tigran Honants. For both see A. and A. Manoukin, eds., *Documents of Armenian Architecture* (Milan, 1984), Vol. XII, *Ani*, Paolo Cuneo, ed. The tenth- or eleventh-century fortress of Amberd contains the ruins of a palace, see A. and A. Manoukin, eds., *Documents of Armenian Architecture* (Milan, 1978), Vol. V, *Amberd*, N. Takarskij and A. Alpago-Novello, eds. A very summary review of existing Armenian palaces is given by Noubar Baboukhanian, "L'architecture des palais d'Arménie," *Del terzo simposio internazionale di arte Armena, 1981* (Venice, 1981), 47–55.
7. Artsruni, *History*. The supplemental final chapter describes events of the eleventh through twelfth centuries.
8. *Ibid.*, 64.
9. Yovhannes Drasxanakertc'i, *History of Armenia*, trans. Krikor Maksoudian (Atlanta, 1987), 8.
10. *Ibid.*, 52.
11. The *ostikan's* full name was Abu'l-Kasim Yūsuf b. Abu'l-Sādġ, a Turk of the Sadġid dynasty.
12. For Asot's death see Drasxanakertc'i, *History*, 163, and Artsruni, *History*, 311–14. For the crowning of Gagik by Yusuf see Artsruni, *History*, 347–48.
13. Artsruni, *History*, 348.
14. *Ibid.* This is a good example of the historian's flattery of Gagik's ancestry: as Gagik was the first King of Vaspurakan, his father was not titled King, but Prince.
15. Drasxanakertc'i, *History*, 197–98.
16. Artsruni, *History*, 349.
17. Drasxanakertc'i, *History*, 212.
18. *Ibid.*, 65.
19. For the construction on the rock of Van see Artsruni, *History*, 316; for the renovation and construction at Ostan see *ibid.*, 315; 352–54.
20. *Ibid.*, 355.
21. *Ibid.*, 356. For a reasonable chronological history see Der Nersessian and Vahramian, *Documents*, Vol. VIII: *Aġtamar*, 21. The years 915–21 mark the longest hiatus in the civil wars which punctuated Gagik's reign, and most likely define the period of major construction.
22. Artsruni, *History*, 370–71.
23. *Ibid.*, 355–56. The description of the city walls with "deep niches with pleasure seats" surely describes an elevated viewing platform, or *mirador*. Such viewing platforms are also known from Gagik's other palaces at Ostan and the Rock of Van; see Artsruni, *History*, 354, 316. *Miradors* are known primarily from Umayyad and Abbasid palaces; see D. Fairchild Ruggles, "The Mirador in Abbasid and Hispano-Umayyad Garden Typology," *Muqarnas*, VII (1990), 73–82. In a forthcoming article Henry Maguire suggests that a tenth-century poem by John Geometres describes such a viewing platform in a fortified tower which overlooked the imperial Aretai palace in Constantinople.
24. Artsruni, *History*, 356.
25. *Ibid.*, 358.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 357.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, 357–58.
30. *Ibid.*, 358.
31. Artsruni, *Patmut'iwn*, 297.
32. *Ibid.*, 297–99.
33. Katharina Otto-Dorn first recognized the similarity between the Caliph's medallion and the sculpted image, but interpreted the latter as a portrait of the Caliph, added by Gagik as a show of fealty. See Otto-Dorn, "Türkisch-Islamisches Bildgut in den Figurenreliefs von Aġtamar," *Anatolia*, VI (1961/62), 19. It is certainly possible that such a commemorative medallion was among the gifts presented to Gagik by the Caliph, although the historian only specifically mentions a crown and decorated robes. See Artsruni, *History*, 348–49.
34. For the view that the inscription is a late addition and that the portrait is of the forefather of the Artsruni clan, see Mnats'akanian, *Aġtamar*, 21–22.

35. It may be suggested that this slight misalignment was necessitated by the inscription which accompanies the depiction of Adam: the medalion was shifted to the right of the stone to facilitate the placement of the inscription on the same block.
36. Artsruni, *Patmut'iwn*, 298–99.
37. On the three other facades scenes of the harvest and of the hunt are mixed together with peaceful scenes of men and animals.
38. James Trilling, "The Soul of the Empire: Style and Meaning in the Mosaic Pavement of the Byzantine Imperial Palace in Constantinople," *DOP*, XLIII (1989), 54–69.
39. Richard Ettinghausen, *From Byzantium to Sasanian Iran and the Islamic World* (Leiden, 1972), 43–45. The iconography of a mosaic from an Umayyad palace has been explained in similar terms, see Ghazi Bisheh, "Umayyad Mosaic Pavements from Qasr al-Hallabat," *Muqarnas*, X (1993), 49–56.
40. For a fuller discussion of this topic see Paul Magdalino, "The Bath of Leo the Wise and the Macedonian Renaissance Revisited: Topography, Iconography, Ceremonial, Ideology," *DOP*, XLII (1988), 97–118; and Henry Maguire, "Style and Ideology in Byzantine Imperial Art," *Gesta*, XXVIII (1989), 217–31.
41. Magdalino, "Bath of Leo the Wise," 106–7.
42. A poem by John Geometres, written in the second half of the tenth century, describes the imperial Aretai palace and praises the emperor: "Do you see the multitude of [creatures]: beasts, birds, fishes? It seems to me that [this multitude], having left every part of the world, has found this place here as its common home. Or running together to the beauty of its lord, as formerly to the melody of Orpheus, they stay here." See Maguire, "A Description of the Aretai Palace and its Garden," *Journal of Garden History*, X (1990), 210–11. In 927 the courtier Theodore Daphnopates also made use of this *topos* in praising the Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos. "Who shall recount the riches of his wisdom and power, who has transformed the wolves of the west, more persistent and bold than those of the east, into such cheerfulness as convinces us that he guards his flock and repels and drives away the savage brutes that molest it. . . ." See R. J. H. Jenkins, "The Peace with Bulgaria (927) Celebrated by Theodore Daphnopates," *Polychronion* (Winter 1966), 287–303; reprint, *Studies on Byzantine History of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (London, 1970), 293. A panegyric by the same author addressed to Romanos's grandson, Romanos II, describes the emperor's foes as wild beasts, who are normally the hunters and hide when they themselves are hunted, yet in the presence of the emperor they prefer to be tamed by him rather than remain free. See Theodore Daphnopates, *Correspondance*, ed. J. Darrouzès and L. G. Westerink (Paris, 1978), 149–53, esp. 152.
43. Gregory of Nyssa, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series graeca*, J. P. Migne, ed., XLIV (Paris, 1857), col. 136ff.
44. Magdalino, "Bath of Leo the Wise," 101–2; 106–7. Cyril Mango suggests that Leo only restored the bath, and that the decorative program described by Choirosphaktes was executed in the early fifth century. See Mango, "The Palace of Marina, the Poet Palladas and the Bath of Leo VI," *Ευφρόσυνον, Αφιέρωμα στον Μανόλη Χατζηδάκη* (1991), 327.
45. Der Nersessian and Vahramian, *Documents*, Vol. VIII: *Aghtamar*, 41.
46. For the most accurate description of the lower fresco cycle see J. M. Thierry, *Monuments arméniens du Vaspurakan* (Paris, 1989), 279–86.
47. The position of the main door is clearly indicated in the description of the church: "on the south side of the apse above the door of the church is set a gallery . . .," Artsruni, *History*, 361.
48. For a discussion of the entire drum cycle see N. Thierry, "Le Cycle," 290–309.
49. For a different interpretation of this figure see Mathews, "Genesis," 247.
50. Otto Demus, *The Mosaic Decoration of San Marco, Venice* (Chicago, 1988), 130.
51. Davies, *Medieval Armenian Art*, fig. 12.
52. Der Nersessian, *Aghtamar*, 14.
53. Drasxanakertc'i, *History*, 167–77. Not surprisingly, the *History of the House of the Artsrunik* contains a different account of the conflict which defends Gagik's actions—carefully omitting any reference to cooperation with Yusuf—and lays much of the blame on Smbat's jealousy of Gagik. See Artsruni, *History*, 345–47.
54. Drasxanakertc'i, *History*, 173.
55. *Ibid.*, 153–55.
56. *Ibid.*, 154–55.
57. Artsruni, *History*, 311–13.
58. *Ibid.*, 339.
59. *Ibid.*, 348.